

Ask Teaching Tolerance



Q. Our school is very divided about where transgender students should change their clothes and use the restroom. I want to be on the right side of history, but I feel like we're not ready. Help!

A big part of not feeling ready may be tied to not knowing enough about what it means to be transgender. Start by educating yourself—and your colleagues—about the differences between sex assigned at birth, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. Becoming informed will prepare you to bust the many myths that fuel current anti-transgender sentiment. (The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice's "Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students" is a great place to find guidance.) As the knowledge base in your school grows, the tensions will subside.

One of the concerns most often cited in debates around school restrooms is that cisgender students will feel uncomfortable sharing these spaces with transgender students. First of all, this concern is based on an assumption (cisgender youth will be uncomfortable) that may be false or that could be addressed by educating the student body. Secondly, we know that transgender youth are frequently made to feel unsafe at school and that being forced to use restrooms that do not match their gender identities contributes to the danger they experience, including danger of being assaulted. Resisting

this policy change privileges the comfort (real or imagined) of one group over very real safety concerns, making marginalized students even more vulnerable.

It is important to keep in mind that the struggle for equal rights is always met with resistance. Left to their own devices, some schools might never be "ready." The discomfort your school's community is experiencing is a side effect of progress. If the experiences of schools that already have inclusive restroom policies are any indication, the discomfort is temporary.

I'm interested in hosting a Mix It Up at Lunch Day

at the university where I teach. Has Mix It Up ever been attempted on a college campus? If so, do you have suggestions for making the event successful?

College campuses are perfect settings for this program. Last year, over 50 institutions of higher education registered for Mix! These events were usually sponsored by an existing group that acted as a planning committee, such as a diversity organization, international student group, student government or SPLC on Campus chapter. Organizers determined a lunchtime activity to help students make connections across boundaries and experience "a-ha!" moments when they discovered they had things in common. They made the events festive and really pumped up the publicity to draw numbers. They also documented the events and held debriefs so they had great memories and lessons to build on for next year.

Teaching Tolerance offers a bank of customizable activities, tips and other resources at mixitup.org to help you get started. Plus, there's a whole community of Mix It Up veterans out there who can offer advice and support. Be sure to register at tolerance.org/mix-it-up/add to join our community and start planning!

ASK TEACHING TOLERANCE!

Need the kind of advice and expertise only Teaching Tolerance can provide? Email us at editor@tolerance.org with "Ask TT" in the subject line.